

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2006

**LOS ANGELES RIVER GREENWAY
RIO DE LOS ANGELES STATE PARK WETLAND**

File No. 06-026

Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to the California State Parks Foundation to implement Phase II of a wetland creation project near the Los Angeles River at Rio de Los Angeles State Park.

LOCATION: Rio de Los Angeles State Park, City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County (see Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Site Design Final Plan

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

Exhibit 4: Mitigated Negative Declaration

Exhibit 5: Mitigation Monitoring Program

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to the California State Parks Foundation to implement Phase II of habitat enhancement at a created wetland in Rio de Los Angeles State Park, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

- a. A final work program, a list of any contractors proposed to be used for the project, and a signing plan acknowledging the Conservancy's funding of this project.
 - b. An agreement between the grantee and the California Department of Parks and Recreation providing access to the grantee for purposes of the project.
2. The grantee shall implement, or causes to be implemented, the mitigation measures relevant to the Conservancy-funded portion of the project and contained in the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Mitigated Negative Declaration, Exhibit 5 to the accompanying staff recommendation.

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 (Sections 31251-31270) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. California State Parks Foundation is a nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.
4. The Coastal Conservancy has independently reviewed the Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program adopted for the Taylor Yard Park Development project on June 28, 2004 (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4) and the mitigation monitoring plan also adopted by California State Parks at that time (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 5) for the project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, and finds that there is no substantial evidence that the Conservancy-funded portion of the project, as mitigated, may have a significant effect on the environment as defined in 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15382."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The Conservancy has been involved in planning for the Los Angeles River greenway since the early 1990's. The focus of Conservancy involvement has been habitat restoration and improved trail connections to the coast. Since September 2004 Conservancy staff have been collaborating with California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) staff in planning for the new Los Angeles River state parks at the Taylor Yard and Cornfield properties. The new parks are Rio de Los Angeles State Park (Taylor Yard) and Los Angeles State Historic Park (Cornfield). These two parks will be the geographic heart of the Los Angeles River Greenway, a series of parks and open space, which ultimately will extend more than 50 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains to the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach.

The California State Parks Foundation (the Foundation) has requested funding from the Conservancy to complete planting at the new wetland site at Rio de Los Angeles State Park. The Foundation has taken the lead in securing additional funding to complete the project and has already secured a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board (see “Project Financing” section below). The Foundation would contract for services, manage and oversee the project. All work would be done in close collaboration with State Parks staff. The grant would allow the Foundation to collect, grow, and install native plants from the Los Angeles River watershed at the created 3.6-acre wetland. Together with the work now in progress by State Parks (Phase I), the Conservancy grant would aid in the creation of a wetland that could serve as a model for future restoration projects within the watershed. The creation of the wetland will help re-establish native riparian habitat that has been lost from the site and will attract birds by providing protective cover, water and forage for a variety of species such as the red-winged blackbird, the northern rough-winged swallow and a number of waterfowl species as they travel up and down the river corridor within the Pacific Flyway.

The creation of a wetland at the new state park is part of a larger development plan (discussed below) for the park approved by the California State Parks Commission in 2005 as part of a General Plan for the new Rio de Los Angeles State Park (formerly Taylor Yard/Parcel D). The 40-acre Parcel D was purchased by State Parks in December 2001 and became Rio de Los Angeles State Park in 2005. In 2003, 20-acre Parcel G-1 was added to the park. Also in 2003 State Parks worked with the City of Los Angeles to develop an integrated park plan that addresses community needs for active recreation while also providing for the recreation of historic native habitat areas near the Los Angeles River. The design of the site addresses the needs for both passive and active recreation and incorporates the use of California native plants throughout the park. The wetland will be a seasonal wetland which will recreate habitat types that historically occurred in this area near the river and it will also collect and treat stormwater before releasing it to the river. Stormwater from the parking lots and playing fields will be directed to several “bioswales” which will filter the water before it enters the wetland and is eventually discharged into the river.

Phase I of the project is presently underway and consists of the grading of the wetland restoration, construction of a trail around the perimeter of the wetlands, placement of interpretive signs, and some preliminary plantings, and construction of a buffer zone between active sports fields and the restored wetlands area. Phase II would be funded by the Conservancy’s grant and will consist of the following: 1) collection and growth of native local plant material; 2) installation of plant material; 3) maintenance and monitoring of the wetland. The Conservancy’s funding will allow for propagation and planting of native vegetation above and beyond the project’s current budget capability. The benefit to the wetlands will be immense and will significantly aid in the establishment of a flourishing wetland at Rio de Los Angeles State Park.

California State Parks Foundation (Foundation) is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting, enhancing and advocating for California’s 278 state parks. For over 35 years, the Foundation has raised funds from its 65,000 members, corporations and foundations to improve and expand park programs and facilities, with special emphasis on environmental education,

diversity, volunteerism, stewardship and advocacy. The Foundation's interest in and commitment to Rio de Los Angeles State Park is long-standing, and aligns with its emphasis on urban parks.

Site Description:

The 60-acre Rio de Los Angeles State Park consists of two parcels of a large property long known as Taylor Yard. Taylor Yard was a maintenance yard for the Southern Pacific Transportation Company. The site is also historically linked to the founding and development of the City of Los Angeles. Taylor Yard is located in a gently sloping river valley known as the Glendale Narrows, two miles north of downtown Los Angeles. At an average elevation of 350 feet above mean sea level, Taylor Yard forms a natural pass connecting the San Fernando Valley to the Los Angeles Coastal Plain. The pass is created by the Elysian Park Hills, which form the southern tip of the Santa Monica Mountains, and the Repetto Hills. The Glendale Narrows portion of the river has a "soft" river bottom, one of three such areas on the river without a concrete river bottom. The soft bottom portion of the river adjacent to Taylor Yard is a mix of sediments, boulders, and cobbles, allowing riparian vegetation to grow, providing habitat for birds, benthic invertebrates, and fish. Griffith Park, which is located at the northern end of the Glendale Narrows, enhances the ecological value of this soft-bottomed stretch of the river. The park provides upland habitat for many of the bird species that frequent the river. A study by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History notes the occurrence of over 100 species of birds in the vicinity of Taylor Yard.

Project History:

In October 1998, the Conservancy funded a study focusing on the feasibility of a multi-objective flood control and wetland restoration project at Taylor Yard. The *Taylor Yard Multiple Objective Feasibility Study*, completed in June 2002, identified four alternatives that included flood storage, habitat restoration, recreation, water treatment, and environmental education. In 1999, State Parks received an appropriation from the Legislature to develop a Los Angeles River Parkway. In 2001, California State Parks purchased its first piece of the future state park, 40-acre Parcel D at Taylor Yard and later acquired the 18-acre Parcel G-1 in 2003. In September 2004, the Conservancy authorized Conservancy staff to disburse funds received from State Parks for planning and technical studies for the Taylor Yard and Cornfield properties in collaboration with State Parks staff. In 2005, the California State Parks Commission approved the General Plan for the Parcel D property at Taylor Yard and reclassified the site Rio de Los Angeles State Park. The park is viewed by many as one of the most important properties of the future Los Angeles River Greenway; a series of riverfront parks and trails extending from the San Fernando Valley to the Pacific Ocean along the Los Angeles River corridor.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Rio de Los Angeles State Park (design and construction)

Phase I (in progress)

California State Parks	\$711,000 (design and grading)
Wildlife Conservation Board	<u>\$ 77,000</u> (trails/interpretive signs)
	\$787,000

Phase II

California State Parks	\$998,000 (construction)
Coastal Conservancy	<u>\$150,000</u> (habitat enhancement)
	\$1,145,000

TOTAL PROJECT COST \$1,932,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund (Proposition 40). Proposition 40 allows funds to be used for restoring land and water resources in accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy's enabling legislation. As described below, the proposed project serves to further the enhancement of the Los Angeles River watershed and is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. In addition, the project is appropriate for funding priority under Proposition 40, since the Conservancy grant will be matched by monies from other sources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31251 *et seq.*) provides for the Coastal Conservancy's participation in a program of coastal resource enhancement. The proposed authorization would facilitate the enhancement of wetland and riparian habitat restoration at Rio de Los Angeles State Park. The Conservancy completed a conceptual restoration feasibility study for Taylor Yard in 2002. In 2004, the Conservancy began a new planning effort, in coordination with State Parks, to carry the conceptual planning forward to more developed alternatives.

Consistent with Section 31251, the proposed authorization would award a grant to a nonprofit organization to assist in implementing habitat restoration and water quality improvements to remedy the loss of natural and scenic values because of human activities. The improvements that result from this authorization will enhance the natural and scenic character of Rio de Los Angeles State Park and will benefit coastal resources.

Consistent with Section 31251.2, the Los Angeles River watershed is partly within and partly outside the coastal zone, and the proposed authorization would address habitat restoration and urban runoff issues both of which could improve water quality in the coastal zone.

Consistent with Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total of the cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. The proposed authorization would allow the Conservancy to fund the second phase of the wetland creation project at Rio de Los Angeles State Park.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective A**, the proposed authorization will implement a project to increase riparian habitat, and promote public recreation and will result in the restoration of habitat in a coastal watershed and creation of river parkways to and along the Los Angeles River. Consistent with Objective A, the proposed authorization includes funding for three years of monitoring of the project.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective B**, the proposed authorization will result in improved water quality that will benefit coastal resources as runoff from the property will be treated on site before reaching the Los Angeles River.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes: See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.

Consistency with the purposes of the funding source: See the "Project Financing" section above.

Support of the public: Los Angeles is one of the most park-poor cities in the country. There is strong community support for the development of new parks. State Parks has already initiated a public planning process for Rio de Los Angeles State Park that includes on-going public meetings. In addition, area legislators have been strong supporters of the project. See Exhibit 3 – letters of support

Location: The project area is near the Los Angeles River; the watershed is a coastal watershed partly within and partly outside the coastal zone. Water quality benefits from on-site treatment of runoff will benefit coastal resources.

Need: The California State Parks Foundation and California State Parks have requested Conservancy assistance to help complete the wetland creation project at Rio de Los

Angeles State Park. The Conservancy completed a study in 2002 looking at restoration feasibility alternatives for a portion of Taylor Yard.

Greater-than-local interest: Revitalization and greening of the Los Angeles River corridor is a major focus of the communities along the river, community groups, nonprofit organizations, and state and federal agencies. Rio de Los Angeles State Park will be a very important component of the larger greenway that is taking shape along the river based on its size, historical significance to the City of Los Angeles and the region, mix of uses, and location near downtown Los Angeles.

Additional Criteria

Leverage: See the “Project Financing” section above.

Realization of prior Conservancy goals: See “Project History” above.

Cooperation: Cooperation among government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community groups has been an increasingly successful element of the planning process for parks and habitat areas along the Ls Angeles River.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:

The proposed project would be consistent with the planning and management policies contained in Section 30231 of the Public Resources Code, which states that “[t]he biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . .” The wetland will be a seasonal wetland which will recreate habitat types that historically occurred in this area near the river and it will also collect and treat stormwater before releasing it to the river. Stormwater from the parking lots and playing fields will be directed to several “bioswales” which will filter the water before it enters the wetland and is eventually discharged into the river.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

On June 28, 2004 the California State Parks Commission certified a Mitigated Negative Declaration (“MND”; see Exhibit 4) for a 40-acre park-development project at Taylor Yard, (now Rio de Los Angeles State Park), consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”). The final MND incorporates public comments, and responses from State Parks.

In its MND, State Parks, CEQA lead agency for the project, addresses five elements: active recreation, passive recreation, support facilities, parking and access, and streetscape improvements.

The Conservancy, a CEQA responsible agency, will help to fund habitat enhancements at a 3.6-acre created wetland on a portion of the 20-acre passive park site. The

Conservancy's funds will be used to collect local native plants, grow plants at a native plant nursery, install the plants at the wetland site, and maintain and monitor the project for up to three years to ensure plant establishment.

The MND determines that the larger, State Parks project will not have any adverse environmental effects in the areas of agricultural resources, cultural resources, geology and soils, hydrology and water quality, land use and planning, mineral resources, noise, population and housing, public services, recreation, transportation/traffic, and utilities and service systems. The MND contains mitigation measures intended to minimize potentially adverse environmental effects of the park project in the areas of aesthetics, air quality, biological resources, and hazards and hazardous materials.

With respect to air quality, the MND includes five mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts during construction—dust and emissions—to less than significant levels. These measures would require that all construction vehicles are properly maintained and operated; that aqueous diesel fuels be used in all construction equipment, where feasible; that diesel oxidation catalysts be used, where feasible; and that fugitive dust emissions be minimized.

With respect to potential effects of the project on biological resources, the MND states that construction would remove or disturb most of the vegetation on the site, including approximately 1.7 acres of riparian woodland and 1.3 acres of freshwater marsh. The MND also notes the possibility of indirect impacts of construction on riparian vegetation along the Los Angeles River and potential disturbance of any wildlife corridors. To address these concerns, mitigation measures require the creation of new marsh and riparian woodland areas to a minimum 1:1 replacement for the habitat that will be destroyed by construction of the park. In addition, weekly bird surveys would be performed to detect any protected native bird or active nest in the project area. If either a protected native bird or active nest is found, all clearance/construction work will be delayed until after the breeding season (generally March 1 – August 31).

With respect to hazards and hazardous materials, the MND states that the area was previously contaminated, but subjected to remediation under the supervision of the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) in 1997 and 1998. However, the MND indicates, due to the large quantities of earthwork needed for the larger project, buried contamination could be exposed. In addition, the extent of groundwater contamination is still under evaluation—but the MND states the expectation that project excavations would not be deep enough to encounter ground water. The MND adopts mitigation measures to address these potential effects. These measures require: 1) DTSC approval of proposed grading plans and written approval to proceed with the recreational development of the site; 2) weekly soil sampling in areas of heavy ground disturbance to ensure that constructions workers and future park users are not exposed to contaminated soil. If such soils are discovered, grading activities in that area will be halted until appropriate remediation measures are identified and approved by DTSC; 3) if contaminated soils are encountered during construction, operations in the area will be stopped, soil samples will be analyzed and any soil exceeding applicable screening

criteria will be hauled to a Class I landfill or other appropriate site; 4) if contaminated groundwater is encountered during construction, construction will be halted until the area is dewatered or other avoidance measures are identified. Dewatering will require a permit from the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board.

With respect to aesthetics, the MND provides mitigation measures to reduce the effects of sports lighting on nearby residences, but this effect does not pertain directly to the Conservancy-funded portion of the project.

The MND includes a mitigation monitoring and reporting program as its section 8.0 to ensure compliance with the mitigation measures identified in the MND. In each case, State Parks will be the enforcement entity. With the proposed mitigation measures and mitigation monitoring and reporting program, staff believes that the potentially significant effects pertinent to the Conservancy-funded portion of the project will be reduced to a level of insignificance. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination.

State Parks has determined, consistent with California Fish and Game Code Section 711.2, that there is no evidence that its proposed project will have a potentially adverse effect on wildlife resources.